

## **Work - Life Balance: Issues from Women's Perspectives**

*Kerja- keseimbangan hidup: Isu dari perspektif wanita*

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### **Abstract**

Modernisation has brought major changes in our lives. One of them is the nature and mode of work which promotes increasing number of women participating in waged jobs. The world of paid jobs has changed a lot; people are now experiencing and trying to understand the importance between their employment and other aspects of their lives. The 20th and 21st centuries depicted transformations impacting on women's life, their career expectations, the power of market forces on female work force, decline of family wage, changes in family structures and impact of the relationship between families and participation in the labour market. This paper is an attempt to share views and opinions on issues of the 'work-life balance' (WLB) from the women's perspectives. The first part of this paper will highlight the social transformation of women and work in Malaysia since the implementation of affirmative development policies in the early 1970's. A discussion on what WLB means is simplified on the second part, of which the writer will try as best not to be too lengthy in defining this concept. Part three will gauge at the several issues and challenges that women are facing in trying to balance between work and life as part of their professional and social commitment towards the betterment of their life and people close to them. The fourth part discusses the WLB policy issues existing amidst our working lives and part five proposes some suggestions toward formulating WLB policies and initiatives which are crucial to ensure that work, apart from the goals to achieve high productivity, are also socially and family-friendly, for the benefit of the all. The story of women's increasing economic independence is a major change, the result of modern living. All over the world 'womenomics' phenomenon is gaining fast momentum. Increased female participation in the paid labour force has contributed to the growth of the economy.

### **Keywords**

Modernization, work force, work - life balance, 'womenomics'

### **Abstrak**

*Pemodenan membawa perubahan besar dalam kehidupan kita. Salah satunya adalah sifat dan cara kerja yang menggalakkan meningkatkan bilangan wanita yang mengambil bahagian dalam pekerjaan yang diperjuangkan. Dunia pekerjaan telah banyak berubah; masyarakat masa kini*

*mengalami dan cuba untuk memahami kepentingan antara pekerjaan mereka dan lain-lain aspek kehidupan mereka. Pada abad ke-20 dan ke- 21 yang digambarkan transformasi memberi kesan kepada kehidupan wanita, harapan kerjaya mereka, kuasa pasaran kepada tenaga kerja wanita, penurunan gaji, perubahan dalam struktur keluarga dan kesan hubungan antara keluarga dan penyertaan dalam pasaran buruh. Penulisan ini merupakan satu cubaan untuk berkongsi pandangan dan pendapat mengenai isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan 'keseimbangan kerja dan kehidupan (WLB) dari perspektif wanita. Bahagian pertama penulisan ini akan mengetengahkan transformasi sosial wanita yang bekerja di Malaysia sejak pelaksanaan dasar-dasar pembangunan afirmatif pada awal 1970-an. Satu perbincangan mengenai apa yang dibawa oleh WLB bermakna dipermudahkan pada bahagian kedua, di mana penulis akan cuba sebaiknya untuk tidak menjadi terlalu panjang dalam menentukan konsep ini. Bahagian tiga mengukur berkenaan dengan isu-isu dan cabaran yang wanita hadapi dalam cuba mengimbangi antara kerja dan kehidupan sebagai sebahagian daripada komitmen profesional dan sosial mereka ke arah kebaikan hidup dan orang yang rapat dengan mereka mereka. Bahagian keempat membincangkan isu-isu dasar yang sedia ada di tengah-tengah WLB kehidupan bekerja dan bahagian lima mencadangkan beberapa cadangan ke arah merangka dasar WLB dan inisiatif yang penting untuk memastikan kerja-kerja itu, selain dari matlamat untuk mencapai produktiviti yang tinggi, juga dari segi sosial dan mesra keluarga, untuk faedah bersama. Perihal meningkatkan kebebasan ekonomi wanita merupakan perubahan besar, hasil daripada kehidupan moden seluruh fenomena 'womenomics' semakin cepat berkembang. Peningkatan penyertaan wanita dalam tenaga buruh yang dibayar telah menyumbang kepada pertumbuhan ekonomi.*

### **Kata kunci**

*Pemodenan, tenaga kerja, keseimbangan kehidupan kerja, 'womenomics'*

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## **Introduction**

Modernisation brought major changes in our lives. One of them is the nature and mode of work which promotes increasing number of women participating in waged jobs. The world of paid jobs has changed a lot; people are now experiencing and trying to understand the importance between their employment and other aspects of their lives. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries depicted transformations impacting on women's life, their career expectations, the power of market forces on female work force, decline of family wage, changes in family structures and impact of the relationship between families and participation in the labour market. It is generally true that discourse on 'work-life balance' depicts the ideal that we should be able to strive to attain. However at the same time, the conventional model of a standard work is deemed the inhibiting factor to attain this balance. People are now moving towards 'family-friendly', 'worker-friendly' or 'social-friendly' workplace. Propagation of policies that promote such approach is also considered 'gender-friendly' with virtue of the family-role expectations of the working people, especially among women.

This paper is an attempt to share views and opinions on issues of the 'work-life balance' (WLB) from the women's perspectives. In particular the subject of discussion emphasis on women who have families, their children, parents or family members under their care. The first part of this paper will highlight the social transformation of women and work in Malaysia since the implementation of affirmative development policies in the early 1970's. This is to provide a brief overview of the progress and development of women and work in this country. A discussion on what WLB means is simplified on the second part, of which the writer will try as best not to be too lengthy in defining this concept. Part three will gauge at the several issues and challenges that women are facing in trying to balance between work and life as part of their professional and social commitment towards the betterment of their life and people close to them. The fourth part discusses the WLB policy issues existing amidst our working lives and part five proposes some suggestions toward formulating WLB policies and initiatives which are crucial to ensure that work, apart from the goals to achieve high productivity, are also socially and family-friendly, for the benefit of the all.

## **Part I: Women and work in Malaysia: a social discussion**

Women and work in Malaysia has experienced tremendous changes since the 1970's. Gender issues and womens' development was given attention by the government and with the formulation of the Malaysia's National Policy on Women in 1989. A chapter on the Women and Development was in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1990-1995) to support the objectives of National Policy on Women. The objectives are to ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition of resources and information as well as access to opportunity and benefits of development for both men and women. Integration of women in the socio-economic sectors has helped increased participation of women in varying types of occupations in both the urban and rural areas, thus this is seen as the means to improve the quality of life, eradicate poverty, and abolish illiteracy and ignorance. Armed with education and training, women are the human resources of the country, contributing to the growth and development of the nation. Women's participation in the working sectors has increased from 44.7% in 1995 to 48.7% in 2006. The potential of women's contribution is further acknowledged with the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Development in 2001 (later renamed the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2004) in promoting gender equity and womens' development. In 2004, the government announced the policy to achieve 30% of women in all level of decision making levels in ministries, departments, and the various public sectors. This is part of the government's commitment to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Such a policy move is crucial in view of the gradual increases of women's participation in power-sharing and decision making in economy, social and politics.

What is work? *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* defined work as “the participation of individuals in productive activities for which they either receive remuneration (in cash or kind) for their participation or are unpaid because they are contributors to a family business enterprise. The definition of work also includes subsistence production of goods for the households and non-economic activities such as domestic work, family and elder care. Construction or repair of owner-occupied buildings and volunteer work for which individuals receive no remuneration” (UN, 2000: 109)

Profound change is inevitably visible of women in Malaysia. Their role and status are transformed, majority are working in several key socio-economic sectors. Malaysian women are now in the forefront, contributing towards the country's national development, be it in the workplace, farm, home, or situating our women in the global economy. Basically, women are found in four areas of the economy: wage work, rural, small-scale business, informal and rural. Since the United Nation's Declaration of the International Women's Year in 1975, concern about equality and understanding womens' issues had come a long way, extending wider path and access to women's participation and contribution towards the country's socio-economic development.

An overview that analyses the main factor that contributes to the changing patterns of women and occupations in Malaysia is directly due to the affirmative intervention by the government in development policies which concentrated on industrialisation and urbanisation with the inception of the NEP since the 1970s. These resulted in a shift of the employment pattern according to gender and occupation, hence subsequently transformed women's profession and livelihood. For example in 1970 about two-thirds of the employed women are doing agricultural work. However, this is not the same in 2000. A notable decline occurred for the agricultural workers, from 66.8 percent in 1970 to 9.2 percent in 2000. Table 1 show that women are now increasingly involved in production work and doing professional type of jobs. They represented about

**Table 1** Percent distribution of employed women by occupational group, Malaysia

<b>Types of Occupation *</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>
Professional, technical and related workers	5.3	8.5	13.1	13.5	20.6
Administrative and managerial workers	0.1	0.3	1.4	1.9	4.6
Clerical and related workers	4.1	11.1	16.4	17.6	17.9
Sales workers	4.9	7.2	8.9	11.3	12.9
Service workers	8.4	9.0	12.1	13.4	na
Agricultural, animal husbandry & forestry workers, fishermen & hunters	66.8	46.3	21.9	15.8	9.2
Production and related workers, transport equipment operators and labourers	10.4	17.6	26.2	26.5	31.6
Unknown	na	na	na	na	3.2
	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1991 (a) & (b), 1995 & 2000

Note: na - not available

31.6 percent of the women working population as production workers in 2000 as compared to only 10.4 percent in 1970. At the same time, the data indicates changes in the occupational patterns where women also increased their share in professional, technical and related work, from 5.3 percent in 1970 to 20.6 percent in 2000. Other notable increases include the clerical workers, from 4.1 percent in 1970 to 17.9 percent in 2000 (Noor Rahamah, 2007).

Changes in the distribution of types of work by gender in Malaysia recorded a figure where women account for 40% of all employed workers. The figures for women and employment in Malaysia have risen since 1991 (Noor Rahamah, 2007). This is indeed an astounding figure meaning women are able to find demand for their labour in paid employment and factors contributing to these are several. Changing social structure, stable economic growth, strong leadership, affirmative policies and strategies, increased level of formal education and trainings plus changing societal values and attitude and democratic decisions are some of the vital factors that help push and encourage women to work.

Table 2 indicates the gender proportion in the Malaysia's labour force which clearly shows a steady increased since 1970. The labour force proportion shows percentage of male labour has always been high and remained steady at around 80.4 percent in 2000. The percentage of increased work rates for women was also fairly stable, at about 42.1 percent in 2000 (Noor Rahamah 2007)

**Table 2** Labour force participation rates, Malaysia

Year	Total	Female	Male
1970	60.2	38.9	81.6
1980	63.3	42.2	84.4
1991	62.9	41.9	83.8
2000	na	42.1	80.4

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980, 1991 (a) & 2000

Access to education and training by both men and women has opened the floodgate. Today, for example, the ratio of female students outnumbered the male students by 61:39. Both men and women are equally important in the country's development, and in particular increasing womens' presence in the working sectors present crucial reasons for elation; women are now able and empowered to support their future generations, the future labor force. Women are able to invest their savings for their families' food, education and health and even leisure. It is inevitably visible that every Malaysian woman who is economically active and given the accessibility and opportunity, aspires to work supports oneself and their family, financially independent and empowered to decide. Thus, women and work also make substantial contribution to the country's economic growth and create economic democracy (Snyder, 2007). In this post-modernization era, the advent of rapid technological change becomes another

factor which is responsible in transforming the concept of work and work place, schedules and responsibility. In developed countries, work can be done anyway and at anytime, virtually or in a specified visible space. This phenomenon is gradually taking place in our country. New meaning and forms of working activities and space are being constructed and outsmarting the conventional ones. This phenomenon takes place in lieu of the ability of women in particular, that want to cope and balance between work and family. Qualified and skilled working women who need to also care for their family are opting out to create the ideal work-space and norm within their own space e.g home, doing virtual works or doing part time jobs in order to balance their family time.

## **Part II: What does work-life balance (WLB) mean?**

Work-Life Balance or WLB is a concept used in the late 1970's in the United Kingdom and later in America in mid 1980's when issues of the quality of life begun to slowly took center stage of debates which saw the impact of jobs on men and women and men, especially married women who need to balance the time between work and family responsibilities.

Are there acceptable definitions to this ambiguous concept? Does WLB means an equal balance in our daily routine, meaning an attempt to schedule a fair and equal number of hours for each personal activity, work and the varying things that we do? The optimist's response to this question may echo the claims that we are living in a world where multi-tasking and competitiveness are seen as the fundamentals of an industrious culture and assiduity is the archetype of modern work and living. Meaning, since we chose to work and be competitive to earn good income and to succeed and strive to the top, therefore, we must be able to cope and balance our life despite the stressful challenges and demands of moden life. To a pessimist, life must be more fluid than that, there is no such perfection as "*one-size fits all*" because there are different priorities, different lives and different goals in each of us. Life is not about work all the time, but there is more than work. Work and life must be balanced and complements each other. But how? And what is it all about? Some may say that Achievement and Enjoyment are two key elements to an effective understanding of what WLB is all about. This sounds deceptive and mind provoking. Most of us work hard to achieve our dreams and goal in our career while enjoyment means we are able to reap the fruits of our career, and the pride that comes with it, satisfaction, happiness, a sense of well being and the joy of sharing and living. Both these key elements are akin to two sides of a coin; each sharing both sides and cannot live without the other. How are we able to have Achievement and Enjoyment in our work, family, friends and self equally? Balancing is never an easy act.

Not with standing the general agreement of the ambiguity of the acceptable definitions, basically WLB is recently been agreed by range of views and in this paper the basic meaning will be used to suit the objective of the paper, i.e understanding WLB from the women's perspectives, in particular, women and work. To almost every working woman (here I would refer 'work' as the standard form of working, formal,

structured and paid), they have income, options, power and able to control and decide. Work provides them the benefits of creativity, intellectual, monetary, social networking, identity and important source of reinforcement outside the family circuit. Work provides self enhancement and motivation, boosting women the power to decide and is in control of their own lives. Work provides women financial self-sufficiency. They are able to raise the standard of living, thus substantially improve their families' financial security, and help provide their children educational opportunities which decades ago may seem impossible.

In this respect, WLB is defined as the 'absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands' (Greenblatt, 2002) or 'having the potential to be a win-win for both individuals and organizations (Barnett and Hall, 2001:192). WLB is to be understood as a mean through which stress, anxiety and burn-out can be addressed by the employer or the organization and able to give wide options to create flexibility of the working arrangements on female employees in particular. Instrumental to these is the implementation of WLB policies, integrating family friendly policies, where the organization can ensure the best and efficient employees attracted and retained, while employees can work, meet family and community responsibilities. Greenblatt referred this as a 'powerful, new national sentiment' (Greenblatt, 2002) where the notion of work-life balance must be adopted as a vital component of workplace organization. This is further echoed by critiques of WLB who sees the 'work-life balance has become accepted as a normative model for a healthy worker in a healthy workplace as such it echoes other currently prevalent discourses of 'balance' like the importance of 'balanced eating regimes', or the desire to produced 'healthy balanced children' (Dupuis & Bruin, 2003). Dupuis and Bruin remarked that WLB is the 'buzz word of our time', meaning a reaction either propagating or blurring the meanings and implementation of WLB, and making this concept the new concern of our generation despite the fact that this is something not new. WLB is now the current mantra, associating this with flexible working hours, reduction in working time and organizational practices that can be able to cater to the need to maintain and juggle both family and employers' demand. In interpreting and understanding WLB, It is important to be aware of the different demands of the workers' lives and the resources that will affect their family, time and energy. In WLB, the prime focus is usually the family-friendly aspect especially concerning childcare faced by working women (and also men) that has young or school-age children.

### **Part III: Issues and Challenges of WLB**

#### **Between work and the "cooking pot"**

Working women in Malaysia are facing similar challenges as their sisters from other parts of the world. They play multiple roles, as a wife, mother, worker and rendering social obligations to her community. They have access to employment opportunities,

earning income, while at the same time caring and nurturing their family. The consequences of these roles varies, depending on factors that may aggravate or support their situation example factors such as the types of occupation, the income received, the facilities provided while caring for their family, spousal support and the extend of the WLB policies provided by their employers. The increase in work hours and work load means that less time will be spent with family, friends and community and pursuing hobbies or activities that women enjoy. Many women bear additional stress when they must decide and balance between their families and what is best for their career. Young children are increasingly being raised by childcare provider, babysitter, maid, or other person other than a parent. Other formal forms of caring and nurturing are taking the place of parents. Older children usually come home to an empty house and spend time watching television, video games or the internet. The consequences of these modernity elements are long-lists.

Work issues are prominently affecting working lives of working women. They have to juggle well in order to maintain balance between work and home. Working women are faced with common dilemma: work and family are equally important. They want to succeed in their career, however they have to set aside some of the virtues of being 'good wife, mother and career'. Within the context of Asian cultural values, the dilemma faced by working women is not disappearing. The increasing professional and domestic workloads and responsibilities still persist. Women are profoundly struggling to carry these multiple roles, thus problems of work-related stress, burn-out, deteriorating family and occupational well-being, psychological and physical complaints are on the rise. Other issues pertaining to WLB among Malaysian women are often identified in areas of flexible working arrangements, employment and maternity benefits, and facilities such as crèche (day care centers).

### **Stress at work**

It is has been made known that long working hours and overloaded tasks consequently affect women's mental and physical health and also their relationships. These include suppressed anger, lack or fragmented sleeping patterns, irritability, poor eating habits, not able to focus and concentrate on the tasks given, absent-mindedness, tearfulness, and lack of humour and the feelings of not being able to cope. Imbalance between the time spent with family and the demands of job may possibly affect family relationships or resulting in family conflict. A direct link between stress-related ill-health and long working hours may not be clear but research has indicated that those workers who have some form of control over their working environment tend to suffer less stress-related ill-health, with clear implications for the concept of work-life balance (Industrial Relations Counselors, 2005).

How employees perceived and view their employment relationship depends on the positive or constructive situation of work activities and demands. If the perception is positive, workers exude exemplary work, willing to spend extra hours on work



activities, willing to work on weekends in order to catch up or meet datelines, some are even willing to do additional projects voluntarily. This satisfying working relationship is usually associated with the organizational commitment and reciprocal constructive engagement between employers and employees, which in consequently translated into higher productivity and lower absenteeism.

Imbalances between work-life (example long working hours, high work pressures) may results in decline of job satisfaction, and possible psychological conflict between workers and employers as the former lost trust toward employers resulting in low morale. In addition, this can also impact negatively on other workers, thus creating potential spiral of work dissatisfaction.

#### **Part IV: Work-Life Balance policies**

In these decades where most organizations emphasis on work efficiency and high productivity, competitive terms and condition offered by employers to attract and retain top people had compelled both talented men and women workers to strive and adhere to these conditions. In lieu of these facts, workers are now able to decide and choose. WLB must be viewed as important and essential component and should be incorporated as part of the working policies and practices for employees to decide and make decisions especially when selecting their employers.

However in terms of working realities in this country, WLB policies do not come as easy as it may sounds. Not all employers may offer WLB packages as part of their terms and condition when hiring employees. The set back is still very much obvious because most organizations do not want to sacrifice market demands with the kind of easy-going kind of work policies or flexi-time and work procedures just for the sake of balancing between their employee's formal and standard work responsibilities with their other non-work commitments. This is where intervention by the government is necessary to ensure affirmative implementation of WLB policies. In order to avoid being accused of unfair treatment, WLB policies must not be aimed at specific sectors of the working population, rather WLB policies must be able to offer choice and control in terms of the working time patterns to all employees irrespective of their gender, marriage or family status. For example, if too much focus or favour is given on women and those with children, this will surely alienate men, the childless and single women/men. Hostility may arise, men and the childless may be alienated, and partiality is felt, leading to disrespect and discontent towards employers. Discretion and wise decision should be applied when imbalance of work and life seem to affect married women in the organization. Discussion and transparency of decision to adopt WLB policies on affected women must be spelled out for them to choose. WLB policies should aim to all; and it must not be assumed that all employees should adopt them. For instance, not everyone agrees to work or suit the flexi working hours, some may see this as a burden. And for those that choose to work flexi hours, arrangement need to be considered and tailored to suit their working arrangement so that they are not excluded by the

organization or departments. In addition, workers who work flexi hours must also be treated seriously and fairly in promotion exercises since productivity does not only mean working very long hours.

In an attempt to introduce WLB policies, it must be taken into consideration that implication of changes in the organization is inevitable. Attitude change is necessary to avoid discrimination against flexi working hours and this will require commitment from the top management to promote and implement WLB policies, not merely lip service. To inculcate the right attitude of WLB, top management must be committed to demonstrate that career advancement at all levels is possible and encouraged through flexi working hours. WLB policies need a holistic approach (again this word is like a mantra in today's approach in dealing with development problems) encompassing tactical and strategic schemes or program which ensure that the WLB is regularly supported and reviewed. To get these going, commitment and assurance from the top management is a crucial prerequisite.

## **Part V: Recommendations of specific actions towards WLB policies and initiatives for the betterment of working women**

WLB policies are crucial in mitigating stress in the workplace and entail organizational commitment. The balance of work and life should be seen as a national issue and be seriously considered. Considerations must be given to ensure that WLB is necessarily integrated into employment packages in response to the increasing pressures of balancing between the increased working hours and the need for family obligations in particular among working women. WLB policies will be able to provide choices and control and act as coping mechanism in managing stress among employees. If employees are able to choose and take control over working arrangements and hours, these will build up empowerment as well as promotion of a healthy lifestyle.

In lieu of these, it is suggested that employer:

1. take strategic approach in managing flexible working time, and recognizing that this WLB initiative is necessary to some individuals,
2. Development and the implementation of the WLB policies and tactical procedures must involve employees. Employees must be made known and receptive to the changing work time and work arrangement,
3. Execute administrative guidelines and procedures for the implementation of WLB initiatives for all level of the employees,
4. Embark on educational and training programmes on the WLB initiatives, implication and impact of these initiatives on other areas of management and organizational life. Enhance upon employees, especially those with young families, the importance of balancing work and life.
5. Take into account that WLB policies do not discriminate career advancement for those who choose to work in different work arrangements. Career advancement is based on performance, irrespective of desk time,

6. Support and take proactive measures on the 'wellness and well-being' management through WLB initiatives. Wellness and well being at work is an added value and the capacity to enhance success (eg. Provide music, restrooms and gymnasiums to allow employees to refresh and energise themselves),
7. Increase maternity leave and encourage other sectors to do the same,
8. Enable women to manage children, households and spousal relationships and still be able to work,
9. Implement child care facilities within the working premise or at other designated location,
10. Present best family-friendly award to organization that promote a balance between work and life and,
11. Conduct regular review and evaluation of WLB policies implementation.

## Conclusion

The story of women's increasing economic independence is a major change, the result of modern living. All over the world 'womenomics' phenomenon is gaining fast momentum. Increased female participation in the paid labour force has contributed to the growth of the economy. The freedom, abilities and opportunities provide striking contrast of women who have depended on their spouse for economic survival as wrote by the famous philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir in her book "The Second Sex" where women she claimed, may never achieve civil liberties as long as they economically dependent. Employment has enabled women to traverse most of the distance that separate her from the male. But theres a price to pay. The balancing act between choosing a career and a family cannot be achieved on her own. A woman needs the institutional support and to make this be realized, WLB policies must be taken seriously at all levels of work in this country.

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